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2 January 1981

MEMORANDUMEl Salvador: Military Prospects

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The armed forces, despite training, equipment, and logistical problems, have contained insurgent operations with present weaponry and personnel. But it has been a military struggle between two weak opponents and the left is clearly in the process of upgrading its armament. Especially with increased external support, the guerrillas could relatively quickly present a more formidable threat--one that would severely tax both the resources and the will of government forces. Major external aid probably will be essential for the Salvadoran armed forces to survive. To be effective in forestalling victory by a guerrilla movement totally inimical to the US, such aid probably would have to be of a magnitude several times the \$5-6 million and small number of advisors presently under consideration.* Even with increased assistance there would be no guarantee of success.

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Current Strategy of the Far Left

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* There is, however, no reliable estimate of the Salvadoran armed forces military needs.

This memorandum was prepared by the Latin America Division of the Office of Political Analysis and coordinated with the Office of Strategic Research, the Office of Economic Research, OER/Trade & Aid, the Clandestine Service, and the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America. It reflects information available as of 2 January 1981. Comments and questions may be directed to Chief, Latin America Division, OPA.

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The continuing reports of an imminent leftist offensive are supported by some circumstantial evidence. Rumors suggest large numbers of international volunteers from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Panama will participate in a major offensive this month.

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Nevertheless, Chalatenango is the logical starting point for a campaign to demonstrate military and political momentum as a prelude to a major offensive in 1981. The insurgents' present tactics appear to be to sustain a high level of assassinations and other spectacular terrorist attacks, and to escalate rural military assaults. An immediate goal is to control a "liberated zone" in which to set up a provisional government. The far left is assured of receiving more than token recognition for such a shadow government. They believe this further international isolation of the civil-military junta would undercut any plans by the incoming US administration to boost military support for the junta.

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Continued improvements in armament would put a final offensive strategy within reach once the guerrillas overcome the logistical and training problems associated with an influx of new equipment. At the moment, both Salvadoran radicals and Havana might exaggerate the extent of the current leftist push, hoping to precipitate a rightwing coup or a Christian Democratic withdrawal from the government prior to the change in US administrations. It is clear, however, that both Cuba and Nicaragua are already collaborating more closely and stepping up their assistance. If a major offensive were to show promise, it could have a snowball effect, spurring recruitment, submerging tactical and personality differences among insurgent groups, and encouraging foreign supporters to accelerate diplomatic and military aid by several orders of magnitude. []

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Status of the Civil Military Government

The recent junta shakeup and the present government restructuring promise some greater efficiency and a higher political profile for junta President Duarte, but no greater civilian control over the armed forces. The Defense Ministry controls military affairs and retains veto power over policy in other important areas. []

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The cogoverning Christian Democratic party did gain a commitment from the military to crack down on abuses by the security force and to begin cleaning house. So far, the military's actions offer a hint of promise in some areas. But no more than a marginal near term impact on the level of officially tolerated antileft terrorism is expected. []

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In a virtually unprecedented action, the military has admitted responsibility for the recent murders of several campesino leaders, promising indemnification and disciplinary action against those involved. The transfers of some high-level officers associated with abuses are scheduled for January. The transfers--if they take place--would be an important symbolic gain but would still fall well short of the Christian Democrats' objectives; moreover, they would only be a superficial restructuring from the military's perspective. The military is, meanwhile, footdragging in the investigations of the assassinations of six leftist leaders and the murders of the four US Catholic women. []

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Continuing indiscriminate warfare against the left will likely lead to another crisis between the military and the Christian Democratic movement. On the whole, the military still has a low opinion of the party for failing to attract broader popular and international support. There remains latent sentiment for throwing out the civilians entirely, even though the military high command appears to recognize the political utility of the party's participation. The improved personal relationship between Christian Democratic leader Duarte and leading military officers has been the glue holding the coalition together through several crises. But it has been at the expense of isolating Duarte from some elements of his party. []

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US Aid

The US military aid extended to date has neither increased US influence over the Salvadoran armed forces nor made them substantially more effective. The limited deliveries, attached conditions, and on again off again timetable have left many Salvadoran officers believing US aid is illusory. This reinforces their resolve to go it alone, employing their own standards and practices. []

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The recent US interruption of economic and military aid to the Salvadoran Government conveyed different signals to different elements of the military institution:

- Some officers, despite their resentment, perceived the halt as an effort by the US to show its displeasure with security force abuses and encourage change.
- Other officers, however, read the US action as undermining the institution's long term chances for survival. In effect, they perceived the US siding with a small group of opportunistic Christian Democrats who--if they could not inspire the US to provide aid when it was most needed--were not worth retaining in the junta.
- When the economic and previously agreed upon military aid was then quickly restored, some officers felt the token offerings and promises to the Christian Democrats had already paid off, and their enthusiasm for follow-through waned. []

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Any move by the US with regard to military aid will be subject to similarly varying interpretations. Continuing to withhold military aid will probably not restrain and may even encourage the extreme right. Rightwing plotters, feeling they have little to lose with the current US administration, could even gamble on a coup in the next several weeks. So far, however, they appear to lack critical high level support. Many rightwing officers, in tandem with archconservative civilians, believe the incoming US administration will allow them to deal with the left as they see fit. They would tend to interpret upgraded military aid as license to employ indiscriminate tactics to crush the left. Other officers might recognize that such an increase was conditioned on improved performance, but we doubt they would be willing to risk military disunity by cracking down strongly on rightist elements while the guerrilla left remains such a potent threat. [redacted]

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Thus, US aid will not necessarily ensure the continuance of a civilian component in the government--indeed it could provoke an outright military takeover. Moreover, military aid also entails tradeoffs with other US interests. Assisting the government as presently constituted will, for example, strain US relations with Mexico, which has publicly stated its opposition to US military aid; diplomatic complications would multiply were US assistance being given to a purely military rightwing government. Another consideration is that foreign supporters of the Salvadoran guerrillas would probably respond to increased US assistance by stepping up their own aid to the insurgents, feeding even more widespread violence. Finally, even under an optimistic scenario, it seems unlikely that the guerrilla threat can be permanently eliminated, so that some US support might have to continue for an extended period. [redacted]

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In our judgment, the Salvadoran Government will probably not be able to withstand the threat from the left without substantial US or other external aid in the future. Arms flows to the insurgents, the likely policies of the foreign supporters supplying the radicals, and the weaknesses of the Salvadoran military institution argue such a need. El Salvador is a very small battlefield and the momentum could shift very quickly to the insurgents with the addition of only a thousand or so well armed combatants and a weakening of the will of government forces. [redacted]

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